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ABSTRACT

Most of the frameworks that have been constructed to mark off the changes in the cycle of adulthood are characterized by a particular focus such as developmental ages, the role of age and timing, or ego development. The theory of Erik Erikson, based upon his clinical observations, represents these crucial turning points in human development: ages 15-22, identity and role confusion; ages 18-28, intimacy versus isolation; ages 25-45, generativity versus stagnation; and ages 45 and over, ego integrity versus despair (maturity). Among the recent theorists with different developmental frameworks of adult life cycles, Gail Sheehy labels the periods of change as pulling up roots (18-22), the trying twenties, catch 30 (28-32), rooting (32-39), deadline decade (35-45), renewal or resignation (midforties). Sheehy and others who parallel her structure contend that each of these stages must be encountered sequentially. When various frameworks are overlapped, the following six stages are revealed: leaving the family (16-22), reaching out (23-28), questions, questions (29-34), midlife explosion (35-43), settling down (44-50), and the mellowing (50 plus). Consideration of the life cycle reveals general characteristics of adult life; points to the inevitability of change; discounts cultural, sex, social class, and historical differences; and facilitates coping in times of stress. (MAI)

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THE ADULT LIFE CYCLE: EXPLORATION AND IMPLICATIONS

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National Council of Teachers
of English

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Historically, the human life cycle has been divided into only two phases: infancy and adulthood. Moreover, for much of our evolution, adulthood commenced at the tender age of 5 or 7, according to the proclamations of such great thinkers as Freud and St. Loyola, who argued that maturity or at least character crystallized at those ages. Childhood, as we currently conceive of it, emerged only in the 17th century, with the growth of the middle class and burgeoning educational system. Other social changes converged in the nineteenth century creation of adolescence, and only recently has attention shifted to the need to delineate the special tasks and characteristics of middle age, or "middlescence" as some are calling it. One consequence of this shift is that people are now beginning to view the notion of maturity (formerly thought to be almost synonymous with adulthood) in a context rather than as a content. That is, growth and development are seen as continuing characteristics of life, and maturity as the individual's successful negotiation of whatever tasks are presented to him/her at each stage of growth.

In attempting to identify adult life cycles we must, as Vaillant (1977) writes, be guided by the concepts of relativity and complementarity. The search is not for fixed ages or stages about which prescriptions can be formulated. Rather, it is for unique features, problems and processes that characterize each decade of life. It is a descriptive search for the patterns underlying the rhythmic paradox of sameness and change. The underlying motivation for the search may be the desire to find solutions to what Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) maintain are common human problems for which all people at all times must find some solution:

1) What is the character of innate human nature?

2) What is the relation of man to nature and supernature?

3) What is the temporal focus of human life?

4) What is the modality of human activity?

5) What is the modality of man's relationship to other men?

Just like a kaleidoscope, at each turn in life's path the same elements will be jiggled into a new form, a new solution to the problem of the human experience. To a great extent, such changed visions constitute the nucleus of all human experience. And, they are as inevitable as they are indifferent. Yet, when experienced outside a context of cycles or rhythms, they are often received as hostile invaders, their presence a mandate for war. Fortunately, the awareness of adult life cycles can provide the reassurance that the kaleidoscope's turns might be anticipated, and that the newly created version of reality born of each shift need not imply the destruction or negation of previous ones. As Vaillant writes, "There is nothing confusing or ambiguous about the fact that our concept of trees constantly changes from one season to the next. What is a tree? A bouquet of pink blossoms, a dark green umbrella, a torch of autumnal orange flame, a stark black latticework softened by a silver glaze? A tree is all of these things...." (1977, p. 199). Knowing about the adult life cycles allows us to embrace each season of our human lives with appreciation, and trust that whatever fluctuations do occur emanate from an underlying consistency.

Many different frameworks have been presented by which changes in adulthood can be marked off, and most are characterized by a particular focus. For example, some cycles have been organized around developmental ages (Levinson, Gould, Sheehy, Vaillant, Stevenson), others around the role of age and timing (Erikson, Neugarten, Buhler), and still others around ego development (Loevinger). While in theoretical formulations such distinctions may be necessary, in actuality the most powerful theory waits at the interface of these diverse foci. The theories

focusing primarily on the role of age and timing, with the exception of Erikson and the additions made to his stage theory by Peck, tend to block the lifespan into large segments basically demarcated by expansion, culmination and contraction, with middle-age represented by a conspicuous lack of activity of the turmoil-inducing type. The theories focusing on ego/character development, on the other hand, adapt a more narrow, psychological focus - useful but less obviously adaptable to pragmatic application. Basically, these theories look at development in the dimensions of impulse control/character development, interpersonal style, conscious preoccupations and cognitive style. Probably the developmental stage theories contribute the most integrated and therefore helpful descriptions of adult life cycles. These theories utilize an age framework developed around the philosophical assumptions of a developmental stage framework. Moreover, at each point of stabilization or transition, qualitative changes in some of the dimensions of ego development are noted.

Even though Erikson's theory has been grouped in a category of theories deemed less useful for our purposes, a more detailed account of his work is presented for three reasons. First, with Peck's additions, his theory comes quite close to sharing the characteristics associated with the developmental stage theories. Second, he was among the first social scientists to persuasively argue that maturation and growth continue throughout adulthood, and finally, his thinking provided the foundation upon which the much-publicized longitudinal Grant Study was constructed. Erikson's "ages of man" theory was based on his clinical observations. His ages represent crucial turning points in human development. Presumably the early stages are the building blocks upon which later stages depend, and if the individualis severely damaged during his/her attempt to negotiate the challenge of a given stage, subsequent turning points will be characterized by greater difficulty. In addition, Erikson views each

stage as overlapping others. The first four stages are expansions on Freud's formulations of stages of early childhood, and need not concern us here. The fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion (puberty and adolescence) occurs between the approximate ages of 15-22. Its beginning is generally marked by the onset of puberty and its conclusion by the termination of school and the initiation of an occupation and marriage or partnership. The task is to find one's role in life as a sexual, productive, responsible adult with a reasonably consistent set of attitudes and values about oneself. The sixth stage, Intimacy vs. Isolation (young adulthood) spans the years between about 18 and 27 or 28. According to Erikson, the individual isn't capable of fully intimate relationships until the identity crisis is fairly well resolved - and earlier attempts at intimacy are likely to represent efforts to define oneself through a relationship with another. If the state of intimacy is not attained, the individual may settle for highly stereotyped interpersonal relationships and come to acquire a deep sense of isolation. The next stage, Generativity vs. Stagnation (adulthood) consumes the years between about 24 and 45. The primary concern of this developmental stage is the production of something/someone that outlives the self. Often this is accomplished through parenthood or occupational achievement. When not satisfied, boredom, impoverishment, and overconcern with physical or psychological decline are likely to result. Finally, the last stage is concerned with Ego Integrity vs. Despair (maturity). Running through the years from roughly 40 through old age, this stage is brought on by the increasing awareness of death and mortality. The central task of this stage is the assessment of one's life, resulting in the affirmation that it has been a meaningful adventure. It seems obvious that for such an affirmation to be likely, generativity must be fulfilled. Without this affirmation, the individual may attain a sense of despair, total meaninglessness and ennui.

Because Erikson's last two stages encompass all the middle and late years,

and because theoretically it is possible for a person to resolve the issue of generativity 40-50 years before his/her death, Peck attempted to further define specific periods in the later years. He divided the later years into two general periods and identified 7 specific issues: during middle age, the person must resolve conflicts centering around 1) valusing wisdom vs. physical powers, 2) socializing vs. sexualizing in human relationships, 3) cathectic flexibility vs. cathectic impoverishment (shift in emotional openness such that loss is tolerated and new ties continue to be formed), and 4) mental flexibility vs. rigidity. During old age, the person must resolve conflicts between 1) ego differentiation vs. work-role preoccupation, 2) body transcendence vs. preoccupation, and 3) ego transcendence vs. preoccupation (Kimmel, 1974).

Recently several theorists have gained prominence with different developmental age frameworks of adult life cycles. Sheehy, Levinson, Gould, Vaillant and Stevenson are probably most notable. Each of these theorists has described and labeled periods in adult life cycles that are defined by unique characteristics within specific age ranges. All suggest that the stages must be encountered sequentially. However, none believes that there is any particular magic for any particular year. In other words, Sheehy's "Catch-30" transition might appear at 25 as well as 35. It's what people face and not how or when they face it that presents itself as the common denominator. There are numerous similarities, which is reassuring, among these theorists' findings. Therefore, each theorist's stages will be identified by label and age range, followed by a brief summary of characteristics peculiar to each stage; afterward areas of similarity will be pointed out.

Gould (stages developed from responses to 524 questionnaires)

16-22 - independence from family - breaking out, staying out, reliance on peers

22-28 - building a future, establishing "real world" competence, marriage

29-34 - wavering assurance, increased self-reflectiveness, focus on

family

35-43 - self-reflectiveness with quiet urgency, discomfort, marital "unbliss", question life's meaning, realization of values, mortality, instabilities, sense of "last chance"

43-50 - die is cast, come to terms with generativity, more stability, friendship and personal relationships more important

50+ - mellowing period, desire for more "human" experiences, more introversion, death awareness, review of contributions, spouse increasingly more important

Vaillant (from the Grant Study - a longitudinal study of Harvard undergraduates started in 1939 - confirmed and interpreted in light of Erikson's work)

Adolescence - identity crisis and resolution, ala Erikson

Intimacy and Career Consolidation - subdivided into 2 stages:

20-25 - after identity crisis resolved, reaching out for other relationships, cementing of friendships and marriage relationships

25-35 - career consolidation, devotion to nuclear family, dullness, narrowness and conformity characterize this period - materialistic concerns prominent, "success" primary concern - inner development a mystery

Generativity: A Second Adolescence - (35-49) - time of turmoil, exploration of world within, midlife crisis, although Vaillant insists much has been unduly made of it (he says Sheehy's high drama is the exception rather than the rule) transitional period of changes, reawakening

Keeping the Meaning - (50+) - relatively more tranquil, but undercurrent of mild regret, quieter, urge to see old culture carried on vs. replaced - sex differentiation less sharp (Jung also notes the tendency for the sexes to approach their opposites - i.e., men become more "feminine" and women more "masculine")

Sheehy (from Passages)

Pulling up Roots (18-22) - need to get away from parents, leaving home, establishing autonomy, peers more important than family

The Trying Twenties (catch phrase: "I should") - taking hold in the adult world - provisional adulthood - shaping a dream, preparing for a lifework, finding a mentor if possible, forming capacity for intimacy, consistent theme is doing what we "should" - exploration and experimentation

Catch-30 - 28-32 - transition period, feelings of being restricted and narrow - commitments altered or deepened, often work of the 20's is torn up, major changes often made

Rooting (32-39) - catch phrase: "I want" - rationality, orderliness, stability, settling down - roots, marriage satisfaction downhill, reduced social life, focus on nuclear family, men concerned with "making it"

Deadline Decade (35-45) - catch phrase: "I must" - crossroads reached - reexamination of purposes and reevaluation of values - feeling of "last chance" - can become time of intense concentration on external advancement - midlife transition

Renewal or Resignation - Restabilization (mid-forties+) - catch phrase: "I am" - equilibrium regained - if one refuses to budge through midlife transition, this can become resignation - if midlife transition has safely been negotiated, restabilization occurs, revitalization - sharp rise in personal happiness - warmth and mellowing, friends more important, more introspection, less "bull"

Of special interest in Sheehy's thinking is her identification of patterns by which people make their passages. That is, while Sheehy believes people to universally pass through each stage, she observed differing styles or patterns to have emerged for executing these moves. She saw the patterns to be dependent on how the choices of the twenties were made. Among men, she noticed the following patterns: transients, locked-in, wunderkind, never-marrieds, paranurturers, latency boys, and integrators. The transients were unwilling or unable to make any firm commitments in their twenties. They attempted to keep all structures tentative and therefore easily reversible. Generally, such people experienced the Catch-30 transition as an urgent compulsion to establish personal goals and attachments, although this was not universally true. Other men made solid commitments in their twenties, but did so without much identity crisis or self-examina-

tion. As a consequence, the Age 30 passage frequently saw them breaking out of "should" molds. Many of these men had followed in their fathers' footsteps. The wunderkind, like the locked-in man, usually has dreams of high achievement, but the wunderkind is different from the locked in men in that he will take greater risks. This is the pattern followed by men with a mentor. The pattern includes early career success: the image is of a young prodigy, and often the marriages of these people are utilitarian in nature. According to Sheehy, a common background in men of this pattern included a figure who made them feel helpless or insecure - and the thrust to get to the top is the drive to vanquish a lingering insecurity. Also, Sheehu maintains that sociopaths and paranoid personalities are heavily represented in this pattern. The next three patterns were not seen very often. Only 5% of American men over 40 are unmarried. Para-nurturers chose lives as clergymen and medical missionaries - spending their early years being responsive to others. The latency boys were identified as a group (Vaillant also identified such men) who had avoided the crisis of identity altogether. Their lives were lived out in bondage to their mothers, underperforming careers, and little if any time with a spouse. Finally, integrators were those "new age" men who attempted to balance their ambitions with a sincere commitment to family and society.

Women's unique patterns were identified as caregivers, either-ors, integrators, never-marrieds, and transients. The caregiving pattern is the traditional female pattern of cherishing, succoring, listening to and believing in other people. Personal ambitions are worked out through others, most often the husband. Generally, women in this pattern are dependent on their attachments' continuing need for them. Many in this pattern break out of it after their children have left home and establish careers in their own right. There are two types of either-ors. The first is the nurturer who defers achievement. The other type is the achiever who defers nurturing. Both patterns are reflections of women's feelings that they must chose either marriage or career, but not both, at least

not simultaneously. Often, women who deferred nurturing were found to have had mentors in their twenties. Integrators attempted to have marriage, family and career simultaneously. Never-married women are self-explanatory, and transient women, like transient men, chose impermanence and prolonged wandering as a lifestyle.

Stevenson (most of this framework is adapted from Sheehy)

Young Adulthood: Uprooting Transition (18-22) - attempt to increase independence from parents - adjustment to being on one's own

Young Adulthood: Provisional Adulthood (22-29) - time spent mastering what they are "supposed" to do - move toward inner-directed goal seeking and less reliance on outside definition of worth, peer group important, but not as much as before

Middlescence:

Catch-30 (29-32) - serious soul searching about future priorities, need to answer question, "What do I want my life to be from now on?" - often big changes - need for realistic goal setting and release of fantasized goals

Taking Root (32-39) - lifestyle stabilization - commitments defined, high career ascendancy/energy - particular squeeze at 35 - can't be "promising" forever

Catch-40 Transition (39-42) - midlife transition - acute discomfort - gap between youthful fantasies and raw realities of actual fulfillment is faced - balance of life shifts from years ahead to years behind - paradox of entering period of greatest fulfillment and being stunned by reality of impending nonexistence - possibly despair, changes in value orientations

Restabilization after the Transition - ability to handle complex environment and highly differentiated self

Mid-40's Inferno - stability crashes down - biologic variable produces swings

Middlescence II:

Reflection in the 50's - important turning point in self-perception - introspection - contemplation - self-evaluation - increased interiority - 50-year inventory - assessment, blurring of masculine and feminine

The Diamond Decade (60's) - often extremely satisfying, time for spouse, no children, but grandchildren are around - continued improvement of many cognitive functions

When these various frameworks are juxtaposed, their overlaps reveal the following six stages of the adult life cycle:

I. (16-22) Leaving the Family

II. (23-28) Reaching Out

III. (29-34) Questions, Questions

IV. (35-43) Midlife Explosion

V. (44-50) Settling Down

VI. (50+) The Mellowing

These stages are aptly described in the brief article from Time (April 28, 1975), which is included here in its entirety (next page).

The life cycle literature is intriguing and captivating reading. However, as the theme of this conference attests, its significance stretches far beyond its present impact. The balance of this paper attempts to explore some of the specific implications of the adult life cycle on relationships.

First, it seems important to look at the most general and encompassing characteristics of the adult life cycle. The literature tends to focus on the particular content issues of the various stages, but while this focus is obviously relevant and appropriate, insights can also be gathered from a more transcendent perspective. From this perspective, it is possible to view cycles underlying cycles. One of these seems to be an ongoing tension between initiating and responding, seeking and merging, and individuation and union. Another centers around "problems of the human condition". This rhythm may be described as the central issues, none of which are ever permanently resolved, that fluctuate in their primacy from stage to stage. Sheehy has noted that particular passages affect our feelings about 1) sense of self in relation to others, 2) proportion of safeness to danger we feel in our lives, 3) perception of time, and 4) shift in

gut level sense of aliveness or stagnation (1974, p. 21). Vaillant has observed another underlying rhythm. He writes that from infancy through adolescence we sequentially master body, reality, and emotions; at about age 40 this sequence is reversed. The ultimate reach of the cycle as a whole is toward honest and total union within ourselves. Each stage presents challenges to different intrapersonal resources, thus eliciting new aspects of the self. Thus the successful negotiation of each stage is inextricably intertwined with self-actualization.

Second, since the life cycle literature has definitely and emphatically illustrated the inevitability of change in an individual's life, it is apparent that partnerships must be entered into with the expectation that at times renegotiation will be inevitable. Put succinctly, there is no basis upon which permanent compatibility can be anticipated. However, since there is some predictability regarding the individual's change patterns, it seems reasonable that particular couples' crises may be somewhat predictable as well. This is the context in which an awareness of the content issues of the various stages would appear to be most useful. For example, a couple who have assumed traditional sex roles in their relationship are almost guaranteed to be out of sync at various points. Women in the traditional role often carve out their identities through others, thus delaying the adolescent identity crisis. Many of these women, in their mid-thirties or later, when their children are less dependent on them, experience the identity crisis at just the time when their husbands are feeling most burdened by their own midlife explosions. The woman, in her explorations, discovers some of her "masculine" traits, while the man is often realizing his "feminine" characteristics in his need to mine more deeply the resources in his intimate relationships. Such effects can be complementary and pave the way for greater intimacy, but drastic changes are unsettling, and all too frequently such couples end up in divorce statistics.

Another particularly shakey partnership period is in the late twenties, or

during the Catch-30 transition. The twenties in general are characterized by polar tugs: the urge to create a safe, firm foundation and the push toward adventure and experimentation. At the Catch-30 passage, somber reappraisals of every facet of life can be expected, and frequently, the individual will opt for major change(s) as a result. The "shoulds" of the 20's often suggest the nature of the "wants" of the 30's. Such shifts need not necessarily create partnership rifts, yet this period has been documented as an extremely popular time for divorce. More in-depth examination of each stage should allow increasingly more specific speculations, and given the salience of the problem, increased energy in this direction is abundantly justified.

Third, it is valuable to remember that these theories generally discount the role of cultural differences, sex differences, social class differences, and historical periods. The ideals expressed in each stage are largely defined by WASP values. For many people, fulfillment in a given stage may mean physical survival and some assurance that offspring will have a reasonable chance for survival. Other factors influence the manifestations of each stage as well. Vaillant has identified four such variables: 1) opportunities and obstacles encountered via social class, ethnic membership, age, sex, effects of war, depression, etc., 2) investment of individual effort, 3) sources of support and guidance available to the individual, and 4) personal resources of the individual (1977). It is important that any application of knowledge about the adult life cycle be tempered by consideration of these and other factors that influence each individual's life.

Finally, a certain degree of faith may be an essential tool in any partnership survival kit. Undoubtedly a significant number of marriages that end in divorce could have been salvaged by the patience born of awareness of life cycles. While it is difficult to detach oneself from the stress of change, this ability may be a prerequisite of coping with the upheaval and crises of people in transition. Pain is an inevitable accompaniment to passages. But the willing-

ness to endure such pain is, paradoxically, the willingness to live abundantly. From the descriptions in the literature of people who failed to successfully negotiate critical passages, it is apparent that our deeper fear should be of not passing. An interesting finding of the Grant Study seems pertinent here. Vaillant found that the critical factor in predicting generation gaps between parents and children was not difference; rather, such gaps were related to parental dishonesty - manifested as reaction formation and the tendency for parents to do the opposite of what they wanted. These parents were described as rigid and constricted as well. An implication of this finding might be that the crucial factor in partnership survival through the upheavals of the adult life cycle is the willingness and ability of the couple to honestly and openly confront their differences. Communication skills training would seem to be crucial in facilitating this task.

Ideally, knowledge about life cycles can allow people to give themselves and others permission and direction for growth - knowing about winter's inevitability enhances our ability to prepare for it, accept its coming, and appreciate its unique characteristics - and cope with it while carrying faith in the equally inevitable Spring. If we can allow ourselves the same metaperspective of our individual life cycles we can be less contentious with changes in ourselves and others, embracing the paradox of change and sameness with the same equanimity with which we embrace all the shorter rhythms of life.

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